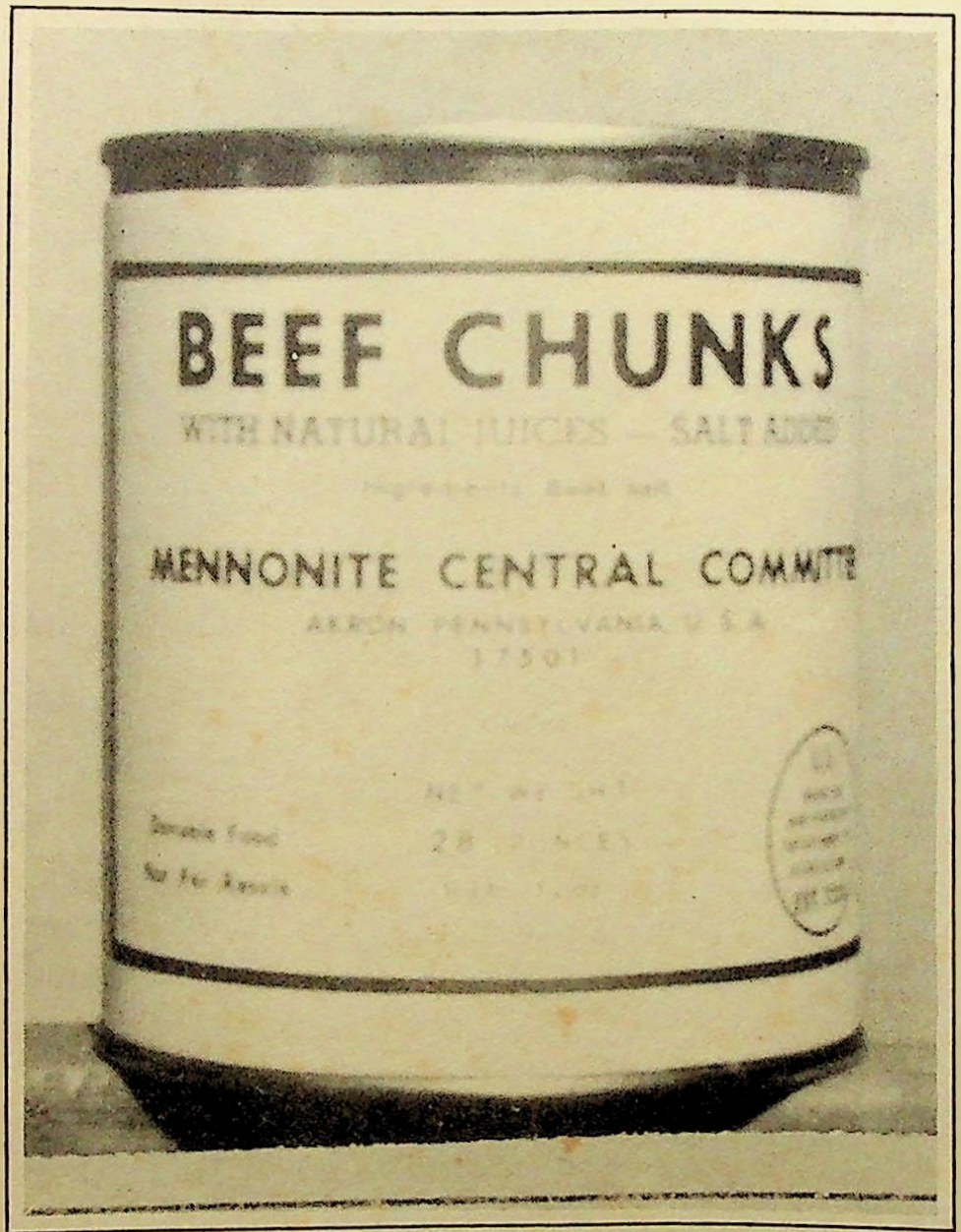
My Memories Of Meat Canning



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and

FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH OF CHRISTIAN

Moundridge, Kansas

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MY MEMORIES OF MEAT CANNING

Edna D. Goering

The early years of Mennonite Central Committee's food canning activities in the 1940's were an important part of my life. I would like to record my recollections of those beginnings, as we joined other volunteers to help fulfill MCC's goals.

To write this account I have researched MCC publications, copies of The Messenger Herald, David Haury's Prairie People, and interviewed many persons who also worked on the canning program. Had this brochure been written years ago when our memories were sharper, there would have been more details and stories. By this time many of us have regrettably forgotten some of our experiences. Having been able to give service and time for the sake of those less fortunate than we, however, still brings a warm memory to our hearts. I'm writing to relate remembered early happenings in our area.

"In the Name of Christ." These words are the motive for Mennonites to serve as helpers of the world's needy people.

An international program to feed the hungry grew out of World War II for Mennonite Central Committee, MCC.

During the war, Mennonites canned food for Civilian Public Service camps. This was a project of the church peace committees and promoted by women's organizations of church and conference as well. MCC provided two-quart glass jars, and most of the canning was done in homes.

There were still needs when the war ended, this time with refugees and other war sufferers. MCC again promoted canning, this time to be of international impact.

A canner was built in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia by a local business firm. It was immediately put to use by area Mennonites who gave their produce and time to process food for relief. When the canner was replaced years later, the original was shipped to Paraguay for continued use.

Kansas Mennonites learned about the Virginia experience and became enthusiastic about joining in a similar venture. Jess Kaufman, Ralph Vogt and Wayne

Henard of Hesston were appointed as a committee to study the possibilities. They decided to build a canner for use in their area, this one to be portable. The key leader of the project was Jess Kaufman, pastor of the South Central Mennonite Church in Hesston, Kansas. He designed the canner and in general served as director of the work. Adin Holdeman, blacksmith, member of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, was an important builder carrying out Kaufman's plans. Several other men from Hesston signed a note at the bank to finance the beginning steps.

Living only two-and-a-half miles north of Hesston, I was much interested and went to Hesston often to see this project take shape.

As the construction progressed, the skills of the workmen were taxed to the limit, often to the point of discouragement. One day after the men had tried yet another adaptation, I heard Jess Kaufman say, "If this isn't going to work, I just don't know." But it did work successfully, and a canner was created. It was not a beautiful invention, according to those who operated it, but the $1,000 cost of its building was repaid many times over in the foods preserved with it.

A heavy four-wheeled trailer hauled the equipment. It contained a large copper kettle with a steam jacket, an iron kettle, pressure cookers, a cooler, and a big can sealer. The trailer with its heavy chassis was protected by a roof. The sides could be let down to provide extra floor space.

October 24, 1946, was a red letter day. The canner was finished. It was located at the Jess Kaufman home at 213 S. Weaver in Hesston. To launch the canner, thirty or forty members of the Hesston Mennonite Church formed a work party. Harry Weaver donated a beef, which was canned and then shipped to India by MCC. On the following day, the canner was pulled to Whitewater where the Emmaus Church processed apple sauce. Other churches waited eagerly for their chance to use the canner. Sponsoring congregations paid three cents a can for the operating costs, a donation all felt worthwhile. A work schedule was set up to guarantee each church its

turn. The program was underway.

During the first year the canner was moved from place to place by farm truck or tractor. Transportation was improved the following year by the use of a two-wheeled trailer, which made it more maneuverable.

With its one-of-a-kind status, canner repairs and improvements had to be done locally. The mechanical expertise of many a Mennonite was taxed throughout the years of operation. Milt Grundman's Repair Shop in Moundridge, Kansas, was the most frequently used source of help.

For the first four years of its existence, the canner was the responsibility of the South Central Mennonite Conference. Then in 1950 it was given to MCC, which furnished the truck tractor to pull it and the operators to accompany it from place to place.

Originally canning was done locally only in the South Central Conference area, but in 1953 the canner moved beyond that limit. Fruits, vegetables, chicken, beef, and pork were canned. When the government tightened restrictions, chicken canning was discontinued. Eventually it became a meat canning operation with beef, pork, lard, and broth being the only foods handled.

In 1968 the government passed the Wholesome Meat Act, and stricter sanitation rules were required with federal inspectors on hand, a continuing pattern today.

After twenty years of service and many miles covered, it was apparent that the canner ought to be replaced. The old one was given to the Bethel College Museum and construction on the new one began in 1973. An improved model was built in Nappanee, Indiana, at a cost of $16,850.00, exclusive of volunteer labor and contributions.

The donations of food and services continue as needs change but hunger and starvation still threaten many lives around the world.

As the canner left Akron headquarters in October 1988, it began its 41st season of operation. The canner travels to Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Ohio,

Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Virginia. In the previous year meat was sent to El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Jamaica, West Bank, Egypt, Korea and Laos. An additional twenty tons of meat and thirty-five tons of broth were distributed in North America.

Operators now travel 10,000 miles annually, canning at thirty worksites. Each batch of beef is made from about four hundred pounds of raw meat, which will fill six hundred cans and take three hours to completely process. Canning is done efficiently and in line with strict government standards.

All of us who have had a part in canning the more than 8,000,000 tins of food to this date are grateful we could help to feed the hungry "In the Name of Christ."

First Mennonite Church of Christian
Moundridge, Kansas

Every congregation has its own story to tell about canning activities. For my congregation, as for many others, canning for Civilian Public Service camps provided the first involvement.

First Mennonite began by giving camp kits. In 1943 under the heading, "Donations for C.P.S. Canning Project", we listed donations of fruits, jams, butters, vegetables and dried vegetables.

The next year showed contributions of canned vegetables, fruits, plum butter, dried corn, and lard.

In 1945 donations were listed under a new category, "For War Sufferers' Relief."

Canning for relief met with some hesitancy and lack of enthusiasm as the program was initially proposed.

Was this all really necessary? Would this conflict with what the women's mission society was already doing, and wasn't that enough? What would the cost be?

However, the majority favored the work and First Mennonite became part of the relief program. A committee was appointed of which I was named chair-

person. Getting help for the work wasn't difficult. Many of the men were living on farms and could arrange their work for volunteer time. Most of the women then were not working outside the home and more free to assist than is the case today.

All canning initially was done in the now familiar two-quart glass jars. Women complained that the Kerr lids then manufactured contained too little rubber, which meant some of the jars didn't seal. Although I reported this to the company, the improvements made didn't arrive in time to help the canning program.

The Eden Church workers, like ours, were having trouble getting jars to seal. They would can the produce, wait several days, and then check the jars for spoilage. Adding to their work load was the fact that their church basement had no kitchen. Therefore the people had to carry down kerosene stoves and pressure cookers.

Because there was considerable breakage and spoilage in the glass containers, the government outlawed their use for overseas shipping. It then became imperative that tin cans be used.

Once again that caused another flurry of anxiety as the new untried method was looked at with skepticism. But there was no choice, so work proceeded. A hand sealer for No. 2½ cans was purchased, and the new method proved its worth. In our 1947 First Mennonite yearbook, canning was listed by size of the cans, rather than by quarts for the first time.

The Pretty Prairie Church canned in both the church basement and in homes of members. There were many fruit orchards in the community, and the church canned peaches, apples and sandhill plums. They, too, canned first for CPS camps and then later for MCC relief.

Our congregation processed fruit, vegetables and chickens. Farmers culled their hens and offered their non-layers to the group for canning. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Waltner had a chicken dressing plant on their farm west of Moundridge; they dressed all chickens brought to them free of charge. John G. Stucky and Sons, owners of the grocery store, later provided a similar valuable service by butchering

beeves free of charge when that phase of canning began.

Another canning experiment called for plums to be used for preserves. Alta and Agnes Graber went to the sand hills near Buhler for free fruit. Going from bush to bush, the women soon had their pails filled and started back, only to discover they were lost. Trying path after path, they finally found the one which took the two exhausted treasure seekers home.

Since First Mennonite had no kitchen facilities, canning was done in homes of members. Mrs. Selma (Christ) Goering had a new brick home, and she invited members to use her basement. Here the hand sealer was used for the first time by the church.

The Christ Graber farm home was the setting for canning two times. The sand hill plums told about were cleaned and cooked in big butchering vats. At another time chicken was cooked in a boiler in the Graber summer kitchen. A wood stove was used. There was a sudden pop, and soot was blown in all directions. Unperturbed, we cleaned up and went on with our tasks.

On at least one occasion, canning was done at Martin Schrag's garage. The next site was the 4-H building on city property east of Moundridge.

We volunteers were of all ages and abilities, some were skilled and knowledgeable, some less. At one time when we were scheduling the canner for the churches, one "new" farm woman said their church wanted the last day because their beef was still on pasture and they had to get it home and corn feed it. How, I don't know. I knew of no fast food for cattle.

Cut fingers were frequent as amateurs handled the cold meat, particularly in the deboning process. When the weather provided more chill than warmth in the drafty buildings, workers bundled up in layers of clothing, sometimes including overshoes. Only the warm fellowship and dedication kept us going.

It should be noted that donations going on at the same time from the years 1946-1950 included a local drive labeled "Community flour and wheat for relief." At First Mennonite, cash totals for that community endeavor were larger than for meat canning.

Those were years of generous giving.

When the Board of Christian Service was organized in First Mennonite in 1957, part of their assignment was the meat canning program and the initial meat committee no longer functioned.

So called "cattle drives" preceded actual canning, as committees called for members to donate cattle for butchering. With money given for the project in church offerings, additional beef was bought.

A step forward is recorded in our 1976 yearbook in the report of the Board of Christian Service: "This year (1975) was the first time that we had a community wide meat canning through the Associated Churches. The community contributed $13,638.38 to the meat canning project. The MCC canner was set up at the MCC warehouse, North Newton. We canned three days from April 23-25, butchering 80 head of cattle and canned 10,720 cans." Community churches included were Emmanuel, Hopefield, Eden, West Zion, McPherson Mennonite, Garden Township, and our congregation.

Another giant step forward, at least for those who did the actual work, occurred on Oct. 2, 1977, when the community canning committee decided to purchase deboned beef.

Griselda Shelly, administrator of the North Newton MCC Center, wrote to the area organizations on August 25, 1978, "You may be interested to know that our region processed 106,811 cans of beef in the 1977-78 season, fall and spring." The region includes Kansas, Nebraska and Minnesota.

Many hands working together were an effective agent for good in ways greater than separate endeavor could have produced.

> "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field: it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."
>
> Matt. 13:31-32

Our first canning effort was like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds which a man cast into the garden; and it grew and waxed into a great tree.

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The following statistics from First Mennonite Church yearbooks show our congregation's concern for the unfortunate and our involvement in relief programs. Records like these can be found in countless other churches as well. There are gaps in the reporting. Mennonites seemingly were better workers than record keepers, and it is possible that more was done than recorded. The yearbooks were published in January or early in the year, and therefore the dates represent the previous year's donations.

1943		
CPS Camps		$1,020.63
1944		
CPS Camps		$2,000.52
Relief		782.72
1945		
CPS Camps		$2,233.22
Canned fruits	126 qts.	
Vegetables	132 qts.	
Plum butter	31 qts.	
Dried corn	3½ lbs.	
Lard	97½ lbs.	
Relief		1,022.95
1946		
CPS Camps		$2,551.04
Fruit	398 qts.	
Vegetables	185 qts.	
War Sufferers Relief		857.00
Jam and Honey	56 qts.	
Fruit	384 qts.	
Vegetables	228 qts.	
Community flour for relief		1,399.00
Wheat 443 bu. @$1.50		1,084.50

	1947	
CPS Camps		$1,817.87
G.C. Emergency Relief		1,232.26
Flour for relief		753.00
Wheat 443 bu. @$1.90		841.70
Canning		
Fruit and Veg.	162 No. 2 cans	
	951 No. 2½ cans	
Beef	361 No. 2½ cans	
Lard	29 No. 10 cans	
	1948	
G.C. Emergency Relief		$1,757.00
Flour for relief		678.50
Wheat 508 bu. @$2.25		1,143.00
	1949	
Peace Committee		$ 30.00
Emergency Relief Canning		366.00
433 No. 2½ cans beef		
Wheat & Cash for flour		1,048.80
G.C. Emergency Relief		1,906.00
	1950	
Emergency Relief		$1,269.00
Flour		325.00
Cash value of wheat		137.20
Cash value of meat		418.00
	1951	
Relief, inc. wheat and flour		$3,290.50
	1952	
Relief, inc. flour		$4,947.08
	1953	
Emergency Relief		$3,540.59
	1954	
Emergency Relief		$3,389.92
Meat for canning		762.48
MCC - CROP		530.00

1955	
MCC - CROP	$1,643.73
Relief Projects	744.67
1956	
Relief Projects	$1,654.91
MCC Wheat and cash	979.00
1957	
Relief, MCC	$1,160.14
MCC Wheat and cash	1,374.10
1958	
CROP	$ 924.80
Beef, 1009 cans	
1959	
MCC CROP	$1,401.38
MCC Material Aid	968.25
Meat Canning	471.28
1960	
MCC CROP	$1,200.80
MCC Material Aid	968.25
Meat Canning	560.23
496 cans beef	
299 cans chicken	
1961	
MCC CROP	$1,114.37
MCC Material Aid	1,661.70
1962	
MCC CROP	$1,471.54
Meat Canning	430.34
1132 cans beef	
1963	
MCC CROP	$1,051.50
MCC Material Aid	2,238.60
Meat Canning	568.01
748 cans beef	

	1964	
Cash for meat		$ 650.00
MCC CROP		200.00
MCC Material aid		1,734.10
	1965	
MCC and CROP		$1,271.87
MCC Material aid		1,446.00
1020 cans beef		
	1966	
MCC and CROP		$1,320.87
MCC Material aid		1,571.75
Meat Canning		789.70
	1967	
MCC and CROP		$1,396.39
MCC Material aid		1,590.70
Meat Canning		748.25
1367 cans		
	1968	
MCC and CROP		$ 207.00
Meat Canning		755.16
654 cans beef		
	1969	
MCC and CROP		$ 231.00
Meat Canning		739.63
540 cans meat		
	1970	
MCC CROP		$ 279.00
Meat Canning		512.53
	1971	
Meat Canning		$ 611.85
	1972	
Meat Canning		$ 759.47
*CROP		1,781.52

1973	
Meat Canning	$ 974.75
MCC Relief	364.72
*CROP	2,305.52
1974	
MCC	$2,160.17
(Meat canning $1,047.80)	
*CROP	2,274.00
1975	
MCC	$2,376.98
(Meat canning $942.85)	
*CROP	2,969.00
1976	
Meat Canning, cash	$13,638.38
80 cattle 10,720 cans	
(community total)	
1977	
Meat Canning	$1,644.38
MCC	1,652.09
*CROP	2,250.00
1978	
Canning	$1,511.01
*CROP	1,479.50
1979	
Meat Canning	$1,481.06
MCC	2,098.03
*CROP	2,576.03
1980	
Meat Canning	$1,481.06
*CROP	3,394.50
1981	
Meat Canning	$2,133.75
MCC	2,600.00
*CROP	3,872.50

1982	
MCC	$2,740.50
Meat Canning	1,918.00
*CROP	4,581.68
*MCC	3,480.00
1983	
MCC	$3,374.30
Meat Canning	1,779.50
*CROP	5,299.50
*CROP Wheat	1,640.32
*MCC Relief sale	1,290.00
1984	
Meat Canning	$1,671.26
MCC "Wheat for India"	700.00
*CROP	5,484.00
*CROP, Wheat	1,091.50
1985	
Meat Canning	$1,807.86
MCC	3,856.60
1986	
Meat Canning	$2,383.50
CROP	300.00
MCC	2,433.50
*CROP	10,153.55
1987	
Meat Canning	$4,071.63
MCC	2,822.00
*CROP	5,387.00
*Wheat	391.00
1988	
Meat Canning	$3,159.75
*CROP	4,231.00
*Wheat	1,079.00

*Denotes direct giving